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THE IMPROVEMENT OF AMERICAN SPEECH

GEORGE PHILIP KRAPP
Columbia University, New York City

The easiest part in projects for improving this or that consists in making the general program. If the world would only shape itself to accord with the constitutions of the societies which have been founded for its welfare, what a different world it would be! But of course the real trouble always begins when one sets out to apply general schemes of reform in detail.

If we would seek the improvement of American speech, where shall we begin? By American speech, as the subject is proposed to me, I understand primarily the spoken word, with the emphasis on "spoken." The matter of choice words, of distinction in style, of good grammar, important as this may be, is not the subject at present under consideration. These topics are the concern of the rhetorician, not primarily of the student of speech.

Now, in the first place, is there such a thing as an American speech? Obviously there is not. No person can put his finger on it, pin it down for public gaze, and say, "Come, I have it. Here is our American speech. Let us improve it." The notion of so simple a thing as an American speech, as though it were a kind of entity, is an abstraction made up from a great variety of real impressions, from a great variety of sources, more or less fused and organized in recollection, but never a language spoken or written by any one group of persons who may be said to represent the essential American. If so, what group is this? The living speech is the possession of the people as a whole. What is often called "the American speech" is merely some theorist's ideal of what American speech should be. The ideal may be good or it may be bad. But in any case, a movement for the improvement of American speech might presumably best turn its attention directly to speech, not to ideals or aspirations for speech. These latter are usually quite capable of improving themselves.

When we come down to it, the improvement of American speech means the improvement of the speech of individual speakers. In this instance one cannot proceed from the general to the particular, because the general can be made only by the actual practice of individuals. But what an enormously complicated matter it becomes when we think of improving the speech of all American speakers. At the same time, what an inspiring conception it is that every speaker is a living element in the composition of the whole speech, that the ideal speech which we have mentioned is merely an abstract generalization from the countless acts of speech which countless individual speakers have willed to perform. If we look at speech in some such way as this, we at least know where to place the responsibility for it.

Fortunately as soon as one begins to define, one begins also to exclude. Though the improvement of American speech, if it means anything as a program of reform, must mean the improvement of the speech of individual Americans, there are manifestly many individuals who take up a great deal of the thought of those interested in speech but who fall into such special classes as to be easily excluded in the consideration of the general question.

First of all, we may exclude those persons who are to be trained in specialized and technical speech activities, as, for example, acting or public speaking. These are separate arts, and, like singing, they call for peculiar professional methods, determined not by the general needs of American speakers, but by the special ends to be attained.

As a second exclusion we may also disregard the correction of speech defects, due either to abnormal conditions in the organs of speech or to improper management of them. This is obviously a branch of the pathology of speech wherein each case must be treated by itself. It is true that one sometimes hears it said that the voice of Americans as a whole is bad, that we are all fit subjects for the linguistic pathologist's laboratory. But the statement is far too sweeping. No one can deny that one hears harsh and strident voices in America, that hard lives reflect themselves in hard voices. But a charge against the nation will not hold, or, if it did, the grounds of it would be too deep seated to be removed by any surface culture of the voice. If the writer were convinced that our

whole American civilization is bad, he would be willing to add the American voice to the general discard. Aside from the complete reconstructionist, the only person who can believe that our general American voice is bad is one who has before him a vision of some kind of super-speech which the disciplinarian is to develop out of our present rudimentary and primitive speech. This is the day of "better" movements of all kinds, and there is no doubt that training can do wonders. Training can produce enormous muscles, can enable a man to lift cannon balls as he would oranges. It can make the soldier move his hands, his arms, his head, his feet with a mechanical precision that seems unbelievable. But is that really the kind of speaking voice we want or need? One must consider that speech is a natural activity, that we are all of us exercised in it from our earliest infancy. If discipline and training are what we require, we get plenty of them. Speech is moreover a social activity. The energy which lies back of it has its source in everyday human situations. If we all went into training camps for the improvement of our speech, no doubt we should speak differently in the end, but it is very doubtful if we should realize better the purpose for which speech exists. Correction of defects and training for special purposes are other matters, but, given a normal, natural speaking voice, the best we can do is to leave it to nature. It is easy to overdo the training of the voice as used in speech. Perhaps the worst possible speaking voice is the voice of one who tells you with every word he utters that he has a well-trained voice. In one of his novels Wells describes one of his characters as exhibiting "a kind of ignoble and premeditated refinement in her speech and manner." Girls in high schools and students of elocution often acquire this kind of super-English, better than the best, though fortunately they also often lose it again after they leave the refinements of the school to enter the realities of life.

Still another exclusion is to be made, though the lines of it are harder to draw. When one thinks of the improvement of American speech, one scarcely thinks of the persons who cannot be said actually to have acquired American speech. In all our cities there are great masses of people of foreign tradition who apparently speak English, but who often speak it with traces of German, or Polish,

or Yiddish, or of any one of a dozen tongues, in their manner of speech. These persons are imperfectly assimilated, and are like children in the sense that they are still in the process of acquiring the language. Obviously they cannot be neglected, for in the end they are going to be factors in determining what American speech shall be. But until their speech is acknowledgedly American, it can scarcely figure in any effort toward the improvement of American speech, except as that speech is a subject for dogmatic instruction.

Yet it is but a short step from the American of foreign tradition to the illiterate native. Shall we exclude the illiterate native from our problem in attempting to define the field of activity of the improver of American speech? Does the illiterate person speak American? Or is he like the foreigner or the child who has not yet mastered the speech? Just where shall the line be drawn between the literate and the illiterate? But let us extend the question further, and ask whether we shall exclude also the various local speeches of the different sections of the country? Shall we exclude in the same way the familiar speech of colloquial intercourse? Are these all to be regarded as imperfectly mastered aspects of the true speech? But who is it then, or who are they, who have mastered the speech? Is there any group of speakers who all speak alike, all speak what everybody acknowledges to be a test for Simon Pure American English?

Well, yes, we educated persons all speak more or less alike when we speak somewhat formally and on the cultivated level, when we try to be present, national, and reputable in our speech. We have what we accept as our polite standard, more or less uniform among cultivated persons, by which we are at least enabled to differentiate other manners of speech. The cultivated speaker knows how to put illiterate speech in its proper place. He does not know quite so well what to do with all the local varieties of speech which he finds when educated people are not speaking formally, and which he finds even to a considerable extent when they are. Does the problem of improving American speech consist in getting rid of all these local differences? Shall we strive all to speak always alike, according to the prescriptions of an approved national stand-

ard? Or are local differences, those customs of speech which lie close to the soil and which are clues to the life and character of regions—are these good in themselves and to be cherished?

The writer confesses that these questions are too hard for him to answer, at least within the limits of a short paper like this. He knows, however, that at present there is no American whose unconstrained speech satisfies the ideal of freedom from local or familiar limitation, that “there ain’t no such animal.” He doubts also if there ever will be. Speech is a creative activity. It is like art in that so far as it is genuine it prefers individuality to conventionality. One must suppose that it is the true function of speech to reveal and not to conceal personality. To varnish it over with a glaze of conventional discipline does very well for a speech that is intended only for exhibition, for a museum speech, but speech which is living must be nimble and quick, even if theoretically less perfect. These are impressions which the writer presents as impressions, not as dogmas. For the worst evil of all in theorizing about speech is to be too rigid. Speech is always a matter of adaptation. Every word we utter is uttered with reference to a particular set of circumstances, which, if we are truly sensitive in the use of speech, determine the word as right for its time and place. One must not be too much at ease in any Zion. In short, would it not be better for us to think about what our American speech is than what it ought to be? If we are interested in the improvement of American speech, can we not best accomplish our end by increasing our realization of the life of American speech?

Many persons, however, are afraid of life, whether in speech or elsewhere. They do not trust it, they avert their eyes from it, because they fear it may not be so good as it ought to be. This accounts for the powerful influence which spelling exerts upon the minds of many persons who concern themselves with the improvement of our speech. Thus in a recent book¹ we are told that “unfortunately, we have with us a large class of persons who speak without thinking how our words are spelled, and who, therefore, squeeze all the juice out of our speech by refusing to enunciate all the niceties of sound that the words contain.” But who does think of how

¹ Vizetelly, *Twenty-five Thousand Words Frequently Mispronounced* (New York, 1917).

words are spelled when he is speaking, and is the "juice" of the life of speech to be found in spelling? Persons who think so seem to feel that here, at least, in spelling we have something hard and fast by which we can measure ourselves; something, too, which has an impersonal dignity about it such as spoken language cannot attain. They proceed then to measure the yardstick by the cloth. For spelling is not the life of the speech; it is merely the shadow of that life. But many of these spelling-idealists are seeking also for distinction in speech, and distinction often seems to mean to them merely being different from your fellow-men. The kind of distinction which comes from pronouncing the final syllable of "certain," "mountain," with the clear vowel of "rain," from pronouncing two *l*'s in "fully," from pronouncing a clear *t* or a clear *c* instead of the *sh*-sound normally current in words like "nation," "vitiate," "negotiate," etc.—this is an easy kind of distinction, but is it worth while? Is it based upon the realities of speech? A little examination shows that it is not, that it is based upon a theoretical speech, upon distrust of the natural everyday speech of men and women. A false theory like this can do incalculable harm to the very cause it professes to serve. The practical, non-theoretical person, when he has such an ideal of speech prescribed for him, perceives that he at least cannot realize it. He knows that he will never be able to talk "like that," or that everybody would think he was a fool if he did. He gives up the whole thing as a bad job, something for professors and teachers to expand upon, but of no concern to a mere man like himself.

It seems to take some courage on the part of many speech-purists to face the fact that the real or true speech is not the same thing as the written word, that it dwells in no remote thin-aired region of the ideal. But once the plunge has been made it is an enormous relief. One passes from the prison house of the theorist into the freedom of nature. One passes also from simplicity to complexity, from relative ease to very great difficulty. But who ever supposed, except the theorist, that the search for truth and the understanding of life were easy or simple? The first step toward improvement in speech consists in having a just estimate of the value of natural speech. I am not here defending colloquialism as

better than formal speech, or maintaining that "the man in the street" is the final test of all that is good in speech. There is probably a place for everything, provided it keeps in its place. My point is that whatever one attempts to do for speech, one must measure one's efforts by practical and not abstract tests, that one must not condemn speech for qualities which are inherent in the nature of speech. It is an error to think of the best speech as something better than human nature demands. Speech which is too good for human nature's daily food is too good to be true.

This sounds very well, perhaps someone says, but is it not true that your natural speech is reprehensibly slovenly? One must first settle upon tests by which to determine the slovenly before one can answer this question. Even slovenliness is relative. By the test of a strait-laced and idealistic theory of speech, no doubt natural speech is slovenly, just as a great many natural habits and customs are condemned as being morally slack by the precisionist and puritan. But the only tests which have any genuine carrying power are those which develop in the actual processes of living among men and women. What strikes the sense of the community as slovenly is slovenly. This sense is not of course fixed and immutable, but it changes to suit the circumstances. Shirt sleeves may be permissible under one set of circumstances but not necessarily so under a different set. Only that speech can be called slovenly which is habitually lazy and muddy, which comes from the mouths of persons who do not exert themselves sufficiently to carry on the normal functions of living. It has its source in physical or nervous debility of some kind, and the correction for it cannot be applied on the surface. Familiar, colloquial, even illiterate speech cannot be dismissed merely as slovenly. The speech of ungrammatical and conventionally uneducated persons is often the very reverse of slovenly. Since it usually arises from circumstances in which the speakers are very deeply and actively interested, it is more likely to be crisp and energetic than slack. Habitual untidiness is reprehensible, but the number of persons who are habitually untidy in their speech is not greater than those who are habitually untidy in their other personal habits—that is to say, is not great at all. Almost universally we respond to the pressure of what our

community expects of us, and whatever satisfies the common sense of decency will not be regarded as slovenly in the community except by the purist. The main thing is obviously to be sensitive to the pressure which the community does bring to bear. It is bad to be slack, but it is still worse to be thick-skinned.

That element of English speech which seems to be the boggy that most frequently rises in the path of those who are moved by the fear of slovenliness is the treatment of vowels in unstressed syllables—that is, the pronunciation of what is often called the “obscure” vowel. It is a fact, amply proved by observation, that all our unstressed vowels, with a few exceptions, are pronounced like the first vowel of “about.” This is not a recent state of affairs. It has been so for centuries, and the process which brought it about has been one of the most characteristic elements in the development of modern English. Here we have the fact. What, now, shall we do about it? Shall we endeavor to stem the tide of history? Has the speech been going to the dogs for the last five hundred years? Is Tennyson less melodious than Chaucer or the *Beowulf*? Mr. Robert Bridges acknowledges that this “obscure” vowel is an attained result in English speech, but apparently he would like to hush it up, store it away in a dark closet as though it were a disgraceful family secret. He objects to recognizing it in phonetic transcription, especially in those used for instruction in speech, because the recognition in a way justifies it, gives it at least a patent of respectability. But who is Mr. Bridges, or who is any purist, that he should assume the right to deny respectability to a custom which has the sanction of universal practice? An appeal to a decision cannot be made on moral grounds. The question is not one of morality. It is merely a question of accepting or not accepting the decision of the English people with respect to a convention. What the purist thinks would not be of the slightest concern, except that his theories tend to put innocent speakers in the wrong and to obfuscate the issue by the introduction of a false ideal.

Assuming that we are willing to face the facts, the important question is, What can education do to increase our sensitiveness to these manifold facts of speech, and how shall it be done? Our problem is not to create sensitiveness to speech, because through

natural experience we have all acquired considerable expertness in that activity. It is the simpler problem of becoming clearer about things which we have perhaps been doing unwittingly, or of adding to our store of personal linguistic knowledge by extending our field of observation to others. To this end it seems to the writer that some method of phonetic study is indispensable. With younger students this may lead no further than the observation of familiar speech-sounds and their recording in some systematic scheme of notation. With more mature students, one may go further and analyze the organic processes of the formation of speech-sounds. But even if one does nothing more than observe and record sounds, the study is enormously repaying. It is the only way by which students can arrive at independence of judgment. The person who has no skill in segregating sounds and no way of indicating them with certainty is dependent either upon instinctive imitation or upon dogmatic instruction for any change which may take place in his speech. Now instinctive imitation is a good way of improving speech, if one can only be sure that the person whose speech is to be reformed will be subjected to a strong enough influence to bring about an imitative response and if one has time enough to apply such a method. Perhaps the best way to make all persons speak well would be to have them associate only with persons who speak well. Wishing for the millennium, however, cannot bring it about.

Dogmatic instruction, on the other hand, is equally unsatisfactory and uneconomical. So long as a student is under specific instruction, he may respond to the commands of his teacher. But the teacher can give only a limited number of commands and can have the student under direction only for a limited time. What we need to present to the student of speech under our instruction is some method of study which he can apply himself and by which he can continually increase his stores of information and broaden his field of experience. Nothing can do this so well as a phonetic approach to the study of speech. It presents to the student an inexhaustible supply of material, derived from the observation both of his own speech and that of others. It teaches him that speech as a living activity is always in a fluid state, that the right use of speech calls for an ever-varying adaptation to circumstances, that

he can judge a fact in speech only when he knows both the fact and the circumstances. The phonetic study of speech does not in itself provide the standards by which a choice is to be made between two forms of speech when the necessity or advisability of making a choice arises. Choices are matters of the will, made in accordance with a complex mingling of desires, habits, and sympathies. But the phonetic study of speech provides a basis upon which intelligent choices can be made. It is the only way by which a student can be made to realize that he is a free agent in the matter of speech, that he has at his command an infinite number of speech-garments with which he can clothe himself, and that the way in which he clothes himself depends upon his own observation of and choice from the vast wardrobe at his disposal.

The writer is aware that many persons shudder at the word "phonetics." He is inclined to think, however, that they shudder at the name rather than the thing itself. All concern with speech-sounds must be a concern with phonetics. The only question is whether the concern shall be carried along with some system and precision—that is, shall be in some degree scientific and thought out—or whether it shall be impressionistic, personal, and amateurish. If our interest is in formal instruction, certainly a scientific method is better than a loose method. It is true that the science of phonetics reaches out into technical regions where it is best not to try to conduct the student whose concern is only with immediate and practical applications. Many questions in phonetics are still unsettled, are still questions for the research laboratory. The same may be said, however, of any other science, even of those which have been cultivated much longer than phonetics. It is true also that phonetics does attract to itself a certain number of indiscreet enthusiasts or cranks. It is a subject about which some persons seem easily to acquire fixed ideas, put forward in and out of season and with little sense of their relative values. One sometimes hears divergent views of what it would seem ought to be simple matters urged with an *odium phoneticum* that makes the gentle soul tremble. This is a state of affairs almost sure to arise in any comparatively new science, when the elation of discovering something, of having a system of one's own, is not steadied by an accepted and traditional body of

scientific thought. But the youth and the abuses of phonetics are no reasons why phonetic methods should not be used when they are practically effective. It does not follow because one studies speech phonetically that one must be a rabid advocate of spelling reform, of an international language, of colloquial speech as contrasted with formal speech, or of any theory for the alteration of speech. The phonetic method merely supplies the facts upon which a theory may be based, if one is moved to the building of theories.

As to theories for improving speech, what was said at the beginning of this paper may be repeated here at the conclusion, that there is little one need or can do. Everyone knows how hard it is to get any half-dozen persons to agree upon a theory. It is hard enough to get them to agree upon a fact, though there is at least some hope of doing this if the fact can be brought clearly enough into view. What we need in our attempts to improve American speech is a greater knowledge of the facts. We are not yet ready for formal creeds and programs. If we know the facts, the theories and voluntary decisions will take care of themselves. Publicity and information are the great safeguards of health in language just as they are of sound morality in business and public affairs. The professional improver of speech who tries to palm off a fancy manufactured article upon the public as the real thing does not deserve well of his country. The most he can do is to build up a speech-proud class who bear their speech about with them as the symbol of their superior excellence. They will always be found out, however, by the person who knows how to analyze speech, who is not put upon by a false glamor. It is the business of those interested in instruction in speech, which we take to mean the improvement of it, to provide the honest seeker with the means of deciding questions for himself by showing him how speech is made. If he is honest he will not go wrong; or if he does he will soon set himself right. Sidney advised the poet who would write to look into his heart and write. The best advice that can be given to the man who would speak is to look into his mouth and speak. If anything is added to this to make it a complete golden rule, let it be that after you have looked into your own, look also into your neighbor's mouth and see how he speaks.